



FAQs

Why do we need changes to the watering rules?

SAWS has a permit from the Edwards Aquifer Authority and is required to reduce the amount of water pumped from the aquifer during drought. Watering rules and restrictions help reduce the demand for discretionary water during peak months and the need for costly new water supply projects for our community.

In 2022, our community's water use was 9% higher than expected given Stage 2 drought enforcement. Recent extreme heat has resulted in the biggest increase in per person water use in 10 years. San Antonio is also growing quickly – and almost all new homes have irrigation and use more water. When irrigation systems are poorly installed, they waste thousands of gallons of water, costing both the customer and the utility.

Who used the most water in summer 2022?

SAWS has over 500,000 residential customers. The top 6% of residential customers used 21% of water in 2022. The bottom 52% of residential customers used 23% of water. Analysis indicates that 5-9% of homes are watering more than once a week in Stage 2.

Do drought rules and enforcement efforts work?

Yes, they work. We just need to improve our outcomes by encouraging better overall compliance. The good news is that about 90% of customers follow the watering rules. For those who receive a violation at a single-family home we see a savings of 3000 gallons/month following the violation notification.

Unfortunately, data does not indicate commercial irrigation sites are reducing their usage after a citation. The citation fee is low in comparison to larger commercial irrigation water bills and does not appear to be an effective deterrent.

What are the advantages to adopting the proposed drought management changes?

The drought rules will apply equally to all SAWS customers. Shifting to a fee on the bill will be more efficient as the criminal process for enforcement is time-consuming for everyone involved. It will also be less stressful for customers who are concerned about a possible criminal record.

What SAWS customers do not have to follow rules today?

All SAWS customers should follow watering rules during drought as a shared responsibility. However, the consequence for violating the rules currently depends on a City of San Antonio Municipal Citation. These cannot be issued to citizens who reside in separately incorporated cities or outside of the extra-territorial jurisdiction. As SAWS has grown there have been more households and businesses who are in these areas. Often water usage is higher where there is no current enforcement consequence.

If there is not a citation, what is the consequence of a violation?

Many utilities have a fee associated with violations of watering rules. Instead of a citation, the new process would be that a fee would be assessed on the SAWS bill. All SAWS fees must be approved by the City of San Antonio.

Will I be impacted by these changes?

90% of SAWS customers will be unaffected by these changes because they are already following the rules. The new process of enforcement will impact customers who have previously not been following watering rules during drought periods.

Will I receive a warning before a violation is issued?

Information about watering rules is communicated through bill inserts, the SAWS website, emails, local newspapers, TV, radio, and social media. Under the proposed system, SAWS can offer the residential customers the opportunity to complete an online Water Education Class and avoid the fee for their first violation.

How much would the fee be for people who violate the watering rules under this new proposal?

There is still analysis going into answering this question. Updates will be posted as they are available. SAWS fees must be authorized by the City of San Antonio. Fees could escalate with repeated violations, deeper stages of drought and for very large water use sites. Fees would reflect the cost of service, including drought enforcement and the system costs of high discretionary water use. The goal is to have fees be reasonable but reflect the urgency of the stage of drought as well as be meaningful to very high users. Proposed fees will likely to smaller in early stages of drought and for smaller water use accounts and larger in deeper drought stages and for very large water use accounts.

What will the process be to dispute a water waste citation?

It is always important that there be an opportunity to question a violation to prevent errors. In this proposal, customers may dispute their citation directly with SAWS rather than going through a lengthy court process. SAWS will be able to provide photographs and notes to concerned customers to ensure there was no error. Customers who do not find the evidence compelling will have an opportunity to communicate a further appeal to SAWS.

How does improving new irrigation systems help customers?

Texas has rigorous irrigation licensing and standards in place, and the industry supports their enforcement. Homeowners will see significant water and bill savings over time with improved irrigation. By making it clear that any irrigation newly attached to SAWS water services must follow all standards, we will reduce water usage and water bills for customers.

When would these changes take effect?

We are currently getting feedback on the proposed changes. Depending on that feedback, it could be possible to get changes completed by early 2024.

How can SAWS clarify that every SAWS must follow drought rules regardless of where they live?

SAWS can clarify the need for all SAWS customers to follow drought related regulations in something called "Utility Service Regulations." Utility Service Regulations exist so that water utilities can provide reliable, safe water services to the community being served. This idea that watering rules are tied to a utility rule is not new among water utilities. Other regional water providers similarly make this clear. For example, New Braunfels and Georgetown have clarified that all customers must follow watering rules.

Why is SAWS proposing a drought surcharge in Stage 3 instead of every other week watering?

Full compliance with once per week watering would yield tremendous savings and make it unlikely that more onerous rules would be needed in the future. The surcharge would be designed to impact only the top 10% of water use accounts and would encourage more careful use of discretionary water. In contrast, the current Stage 3 of every other week watering would be very difficult for many people who are already following the watering rules. It seems fairer to encourage a small number of customers to comply before imposing more regulations on everyone.

How much water does a residence have to use to be subject to the stage 3 water surcharge?

This is still being analyzed. One proposal is to look at a level around 15,000-18,000 gallons per month because 90% of watering bills are lower than this level.

What about large families? Would they be impacted by a surcharge?

No. There have been studies on indoor water usage for family size. Even a home with 10 adults and 10 children would still not reach 18,000 of indoor water consumption in a month. This level of usage is almost always reflecting discretionary uses of water.

What if I had a terrible leak? Would this result in a surcharge?

No, however, the household with the leak would need to engage with SAWS to provide information on the leak. There is already an adjustment policy for large leaks that unfortunately can occur. And in a few short years all households will have the benefit of a ConnectH2O meter that would document how much water went to a leak.

Would commercial accounts also be subject to these surcharges if the new Stage Three were declared?

All commercial water that is billed as irrigation would be subject to the surcharges. Water at businesses that is for indoor uses is billed differently and would not be subject to the surcharge. SAWS commercial accounts have dedicated irrigation meters separate from indoor ones to facilitate this process.

Why is there a proposed change to drip watering rules? I thought drip uses almost no water?

Drip irrigation has grown in popularity in recent years in large part because current watering rules allow it to be used eight hours a day, every day. It is a big misunderstanding that drip uses very little water. The application rate from drip irrigation is not lower than spray irrigation. The advantage of

drip is that it can result in less evaporation and better application of water directly to where plants need it. While this is a good efficiency, that is not a logical reason to run it daily or even multiple days a week. We see homes and businesses with drip using very large amounts of water during drought because some see drip as a “loophole” in the rules. This needs to change so that drip is used appropriately to maintain plants and not as a mechanism to use more water.

But don't I need to run drip for hours for it to be effective?

No. It is one of the misunderstandings about drip irrigation. Typical drip installations apply water at the same rate as spray irrigation. With either spray or drip it is important to know the application rate to set the timing appropriately. Because many people believe drip should run for hours, they often use excessive water operating it more than twice as much as is logical.

My vegetable garden is watered with drip irrigation. Will it be limited to one day a week?

No, we're proposing a variance to allow additional watering for residential and community vegetable gardens.

My HOA (Homeowners Association) tells me I have to keep green grass in my yard in spite of the drought – is there anything I can do about this?

There are regulations in local and state statute that discourage this action by HOAs. SAWS is working to communicate to HOAs that they may not require installation of grass and watering it in excess to keep it green.

Will my landscape be able to survive once a week watering?

Yes! Since 2006, homebuilders and developers have been required to offer a drought-tolerant landscape option or install an approved drought-tolerant turfgrass. That being said, it's normal for grass to not be green in summer or times of drought in San Antonio. Grass may turn yellow as it goes dormant, but that doesn't mean it's dead! Mature trees have survived many droughts before and have deep roots that are skilled at keeping them thriving. For more tips and tricks on watering effectively, visit the Garden Resources tab on GardenStyleSA.com.

I heard I can get a variance for watering my new landscape. Is that true?

New landscape variances are available for new construction or in cases where renovation or construction has damaged at least half of an existing landscape. During drought conditions variances are not given to replace dead plants or grass that is not lush. Establishment of new grass and plants is very difficult in the hottest months in San Antonio. It is better to wait through the drought to milder conditions.

Does SAWS offer programs to help transition to a more drought-tolerant landscape?

SAWS offers several water-saving programs that you can find at GardenStyleSA.com.
